

Thus Sejong's system was not only based on the best linguistic science of his day, it literally engraphed that science. And his recognition of an independent phonetic category for vowels went completely beyond the Chinese theory from which he had started. On the other hand, his provision that the letters, though they constituted a genuine alphabet, be written in syllabic blocks rather than sequentially in a line, shows an accommodation to the basic East Asian habit of writing a single syllable as a single graphic unit. No other alphabet in the world has such a feature.

The commentary went on to rationalize the phonological structure of the alphabet in terms of what might be called a Confucian physics, which in turn was correlated, in the Confucian manner, with ethics, music, and the sequence of the seasons. This section, not easy to summarize, was designed to convince men trained in Confucianism of the fundamental appropriateness of a phonetic script.

The commentary continued with orthographic explanations concerning initial consonants, vowels, and final consonants, and laid out a system of diacritics to indicate pitch levels, or accents. It concluded with a long list of sample Korean words demonstrating possible combinations of the letters.

The Korean alphabet is thus revealed to be a script like no other. It was conceived and invented by a true genius, and explained in theoretical terms that, for their time and place, can be called scientific without hesitation or scruple. Phonetic evolution and various orthographic reforms since Sejong's time have rendered three of the original consonants and one of the vowels obsolete, and the letter shapes, originally rather geometric, have gradually

become streamlined. But in its fundamental design and structure, the alphabet has not changed since it was invented.

But it proved to be easier to create a theoretically ingenious alphabet than it was to change social and cultural attitudes toward writing and literacy. It is true that the Buddhists, under the patronage of Sejong and especially of his son Sejo (r. 1455-1468), quickly realized the benefits of an alphabet for the production of popular translations of religious texts, and that women took up the alphabet almost immediately for purposes of informal writing and correspondence. But neither the Buddhists nor women had much influence in public education. Sejong tried to encourage Confucian scholars to use the alphabet for translation and educational work, but it was nearly a century before there was any significant response to his initiative. By the early seventeenth

century the alphabet began to have an impact on the growth of vernacular literature, but in the main classical Chinese still held sway. Predictably, opposition to the alphabet was the greatest in the bureaucracy, which not only retained Chinese in its traditional exclusive role until the latter part of the nineteenth century, but even continued to favor the old character-based systems over the alphabet in many vernacular applications. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, however, trends in Korean society and the gradual breakdown of the traditional class structure brought major changes in political and cultural attitudes. The vigorous growth of Korean nationalism created many champions of native Korean culture, and of all the treasures that they claimed from the national past, the alphabet was the first and the greatest. Sejong's wisdom was recognized and his vision vindicated, and in the end his "Correct Sounds" enjoyed the respect and gratitude of all Korean people.

For approximately the last hundred years, Koreans have called their alphabet by the name "Han'gŭl, " or "Han script." The syllable *han* is sig-

nificantly ambiguous, yielding three different but legitimate translations for the name: "the Korean script," "the great script" and "the one script." This last reflects the desire of most modern Koreans to use Han'gŭl unmixed with Chinese characters, which because of the Chinese origin of a part of the Korean vocabulary was once a popular option but which in more recent times has encountered steady resistance throughout the culture.